EARLY FOREBODINGS OF THE DEATH OF BUDDHISM∗

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

It is well known that the great Japanese reformation of Buddhism during the Kamakura period (1185-1333) took place in a climate of crisis. A visible symbol of this was the widespread feeling that Buddhism had entered its final period (mappō). Honen (1133-1212), Shinran (1173-1262), and Nichiren (1222-1282) all used the idea of mappō to justify and explain the radical departures that they felt were necessary and which in each case resulted in an important new school of Buddhism. They echoed one another in proclaiming that traditional Buddhism was on its last legs and that people of this final period no longer had the capacity to understand or practice Buddhism. But instead of leading to despair, the acceptance of the idea of the death of Buddhism actually stimulated these Buddhist leaders to establish new forms for this period of emergency.

Fortunately, within the Buddhist tradition itself was the prediction that these “last days” would occur. Thus, the innovators of Kamakura were able to affirm the Buddhist tradition while simultaneously changing it. The prediction by Buddhists that Buddhism would die out is not just a curious and creative aberration which arose in Japan. Rather, it is a theme which Buddhists had found meaningful and useful at various times in Buddhist history. It is intriguing and exciting to reflect on the psychological, social and religious conditions which gave rise to this idea in various periods of history, as well as on the fact that Buddhism has been so adaptable and long-lived while simultaneously predicting its own demise.
In order to gain a proper perspective for appreciating the various ramifications of this idea, an historical overview should be established. Japanese Buddhists inherited the concept of the end of true Buddhism (mappō) from Chinese thinkers such as Tao-ch’o (562-645), who in turn had adopted it to rationalize his own religious practices. However, the origins of the idea ultimately rest in the early forebodings of Indian Buddhists. While numerous studies have been made by Japanese scholars on the Japanese experience of mappō, far less attention has been given to the idea as it developed in China, while only Lamotte and Kumoi have given serious attention to its origins in India. Therefore, as the first step in understanding the meaning of mappō for Buddhists, it is important to re-examine the source of this idea in India and to trace its early development and subsequent transmission to China. This is the purpose of the present paper.

Five Reasons for the Disappearance of Buddhism

It is striking to find in the earliest texts of Buddhism the prediction that one day Buddhism will disappear. Of course, since the Buddha taught that everything is in flux, and everything that arises must also pass away, it is consistent to apply that to Buddhism as well. As Étienne Lamotte has pointed out, the Buddha’s teaching of causal relationships is considered to be unchanging. But this teaching does not exist only in the absolute (paramārtha). Since it is learned, followed, and taught by people, it also exists in the realm of change (samvṛtī). As such it also is subsumed under the universal principle of causality. It can arise in the consciousness of people under certain conditions, and because of a change of circumstances it may also pass away from their minds.

Kumoi Shōzen, the noted Pali scholar, has provided a succinct and helpful overview of the earliest development in Buddhism of the idea that the True Dharma of the Buddha would one day decline and disappear. He also suggests that it was unavoidable that one day the Buddhist concept of conditioned origination and change should be applied to the understanding and practice of Buddhism itself. In his research, he found five different categories of texts which express the circumstances of this decline.